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Fr K.M. Matthew S.J.

Obituary

Fr (Dr) K. M. Matthew suffered a massive heart attack and passed away on 16th April 2004. He was the Director of both the Rapinat Herbarium, St Joseph's College, Tiruchirapalli and the Anglade Institute of Natural History, Shembaganur, Kodaikanal.

Fr Matthew was born on 16th March 1930 at Ramapuram in Kottayam district, Kerala. He had the basic education at St Augustine's School, Ramapuram. After doing his intermediate at St Berchman's College, Changanassery, young Matthew came to St Joseph's College, Tiruchirapalli for his B.A in Botany (1947-1950). He joined the Jesuit Order in 1950 and creatively used his spare time at Shembaganur to botanise the Palani Hills.

After taking M.Sc from St Joseph's College, Tiruchirapalli, he joined Fr H. Santapau of St Xavier's College, Bombay (by this time Fr Santapau had become the Director of Botanical Survey of India) to pursue his doctoral programme in Bombay University on *The exotic flora of Kodaikanal*. He got his Ph.D in 1962. He went upto Kurseong near Darjeeling for his Theology and at Kurseong he explored the surrounding Eastern Himalayas. He was ordained priest in 1965 and finished his Theology in 1966.

He started teaching botany at St Joseph's College, Tiruchirapalli in 1967. He developed a strong research center in systematic botany at the College and established a Herbarium which he named after his teacher Fr Alfred Rapinat. Upon a research scholarship from Kew, he obtained an M.Sc in advanced Taxonomy. After this, he worked at Leiden on a world monograph of the Cornaceae under ZWO Fellowship of the Dutch Government.

Returning to St Joseph's College in 1974, he initiated extensive field work in botany. His main botanical contribution is the seven volume work on Illustrated Flora of Tamil Nadu State. Part one entitled *The Flora of Tamil Nadu Carnatic* (1981-1988) covered the plains in four volumes. This was summarised into an *Excursion Flora* in 1991 (English) and in 1993 (Tamil). Under Part two entitled *Flora of the Palani Hills* (1996-1999), he produced three volumes. In all, he has 12 books and more than 100 scientific papers to his credit.

He established Anglade Institute of Natural History and Palani Hills Conservation Council to tackle many ecological issues. *A Handbook of the Anglade Institute* and a six monthly *Shola* he published complemented his efforts to preserve the biodiversity of Palani Hills.

Fr Matthew's work earned him several citations and honours which he accepted without letting them go to his head. He was a member of several international bodies in botany and was a life member of the Linnean Society of London. He enjoyed elected Foreign Membership (2002) in Linnean Society.

On 16th March 2004 he crossed 74 years. In Holy Week, April, he made his Annual Retreat at Sacred Heart College, Shembaganur, and during it he had a strong spasm of chest pain which caused him to fall down. Back in Tiruchirapalli, he was planning a botanical trek to Kodaikanal when he began to have chest pain once again. A check up at the Child Jesus Hospital revealed nothing but they wanted him to have a treadmill test. At 9.30 am on 16th April when the test was barely started, he collapsed and his abdomen began to swell. They stopped the test and put him to emergency care and at 9.40 am he was dead.

Fr Matthew felt he was merely checking his account but the good Lord made it the Final Audit. 'Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities' (Luke 19:17). The master craftsman had never counted his chickens before they were hatched and always insisted on doing the job perfectly so that the results would inevitably follow. Results really did follow.

S. JOHN BRITTO S.J. and A. J. MIRANDA S.J. (Tiruchirapalli)

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